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Forced deportations of Iraqi asylum seekers on hold

“We will accept those returning of their own free will and those guilty of crimes,” says Iraqi ambassador Matheel al-Sabti.



Matheel al-Sabti, Iraqi ambassador to Finland. Image: Antti Haanpää.

“Iraq will no longer accept rejected asylum seekers who do not willingly want to return to Iraq,” says Iraqi ambassador Matheel al-Sabti.

“The Iraqi government has opposed forced repatriations for a long time and is now preventing them in practice too.”

Last month, Yle reported that deportees returned from Finland to Iraq have been turned around and sent back to Helsinki, with local officials saying that the returnees did not have the required travel documents.

This is not a new position, al-Sabti says, adding that Iraq is finally enforcing the policy it announced eons ago, instead of allowing EU countries to act against the will of the government.

"We will accept those returning of their own free will and those guilty of crimes, but we oppose forced repatriations."

Forced deportations on hold

Marko Heikkilä from Finland's National Police Board says deportations of Iraqis without passports are temporarily on hold.

"Whether it's Iraq or Nigeria, a sovereign state can decide who to let in and on what conditions. If the conditions are not met, repatriations cannot be carried out."

Last year, Finnish police began to issue [temporary travel documents](#) to ensure that rejected asylum seekers without passports could be returned.

However, al-Sabti believes that regardless of the documents they may carry, Iraq will not allow entry to anyone who opposes their deportation.

"If they do not want to get off the airplane, or the police will not receive them, they cannot be returned."

A majority of Iraqis go back to their home country through the so called voluntary return programme run by the Finnish interior ministry.

According to the Police Board's Heikkilä, it is not unusual for forced deportations to fail. "We are quite used to the circumstances changing. We haven't pressed the panic button."

"Mistake was made in 2015"

According to al-Sabti, political pressure in Finland and Iraq is one reason for the government to refuse involuntary deportees.

"Asylum seekers, their families, friends and the media, they all accuse the Iraqi government of accepting forced deportations."

But decision-makers in Iraq who are about to form a government, do not want any additional problems, al-Sabti says.

"They won't take the risk with the deportations and gamble away their political positions."

The ambassador suggests that the Finnish government wait until the situation in Iraq stabilises.

"Then these people who belong in Iraq could return," he says, adding that it is understandably a difficult issue for Finland's interior ministry which wants to bring the deportations to a conclusion.

"But the mistake was already made in 2015 when Europe left its borders open."

Between June 2017 and May 2018, the Finnish Immigration Service issued 119 deportation orders to Iraq.

Sources Yle

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